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ABSTRACT

Distance education has grown tremendously in the past 20 years, especially in developing countries, but it faces many challenges as it moves toward the 21st century. The most common current uses of distance education include university and higher education, teacher education, vocational and professional upgrading, substitute secondary education for adults and adolescents, and adult basic and nonformal education, all conducted at a distance. A recent study concluded that distance education seems to be here to stay and is likely to expand. It seems to be well established at the university level and in teacher education; secondary and adult basic education distance education programs have been successful but lack recognition. Distance education can be economical if conducted in large enough programs to achieve economies of scale. Problems and challenges facing distance education, especially in developing countries, fall into the areas of material development and delivery, tutorial and student support services, administrative structures, and political commitment and understanding. A tentative agenda for the development of distance education in countries such as Botswana could include the following: small-population, specialized courses; primary and secondary teacher training and upgrading; courses for adults and young adults, mainly in job skills; courses for school dropouts from primary schools; and courses in basic literacy for adults. Some of these courses would require intensive preparation, especially those for low-literate adults, and would require more personal meetings than the other types of distance education. Distance education should be seen as a supplementary rather than an alternative form of education and should be of equal quality as other types of education. (KC)

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Distance Education and Education for All By The Year 2000: Challenges for the Nineties

Paper Presented to the Distance Education Conference: Strengthening Partnerships

GABORONE, Botswana

February 1992

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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1. INTRODUCTION:

It is a great privilege for me, on behalf of my institution, to have been invited to deliver this keynote address to your conference. When we were invited to send someone, I was away; I would like to quote an internal IEC memo between two colleagues: "IEC is invited to send a 'keynote speaker' to the conference: I feel it is very important that we should be represented.

1) because of our previous links with Botswana

2) because of its emphasis on secondary education for primary school leavers and dropouts and our own recent research interest in effective distance education for these groups.

3) because of our interest in continued links with future distance education developments in Botswana.

It is now 21 years since I first visited Botswana, a few weeks after IEC's foundation and while the initial discussions on the foundation of what was to be called the Botswana Extension College (BEC) were in progress. So I feel a close association with distance education here and am pleased to be able to participate in discussions which are re-examining its roles for the future.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

When the IEC was founded, in 1971, and even two years later when Botswana Extension College was set up, distance education was not a term in common usage. What has come to be called distance education was just emerging from the coming together of three previously separate educational traditions: correspondence education, educational broadcasting and occasional part-time face-to-face tuition. The movement that emerged - which is now perhaps one of the most rapidly expanding sectors of education internationally - also reflected three somewhat different educational ideologies which I believe are all important to bear in mind as we advance towards the year 2000: independent or open learning which put emphasis on the importance of restoring control over access, content, pace, place and learning; extension education, stressing the vital need to harness educational learning - or learning through "correspondence" between teachers and learners, emphasising the vital role of two-way and individualised communication between teacher and learner in mass education.

In the 21 years since IEC came into being - which concided with the opening of the non-existent doors of the UK Open University to its first students - distance education has grown apace. There are now more than 25 distance education universities throughout the world. Here in Africa, in 1971, the IEC identified 19 distance education programmes. There must by now be well over 50 such programmes in the public sector, a change recognised by comparing attendance at the 1971 Abidjan Conference on Correspondence

Education in Africa' with the UNESCO Arusha Conference on Distance

Education in Africa in 1990. The latter reflected the urgency for educational expansion expressed at the world conference in Jomtien on Education for All and the expression there of expectations that distance education would have important roles to play in the achievement of the Jomtien goals. I want in this paper to try briefly to reflect on the experience of distance education internationally at pre-tertiary levels especially on that experience within the orbit of institutions with which the IEC has been closely connected, and to try to highlight what I see as some of the challenges and problems facing distance education in developing countries in view of the expectations for it which are now being expressed.

3. CONCLUSIONS FROM EXPERIENCE:

Distance education is now commonly used for many different kinds and levels of education. Perhaps the most common uses can be categorised as:

- university and higher education at-a-distance
- teacher education (both initial and in-service) at-a-distance
- vocational and professional upgrading at-a-distance
- substitute secondary education (for adults and adolescents) at-
- a-distance
- adult basic and non-formal education at-a-distance

Botswana has had experience of all five, as have many other countries.

In 1989 the IEC undertook an evaluatory study of its own work and that of 10 institutions with which it had been closely associated. The study was conducted in association with those institutions, which included the Botswana Department of Non-Formal Education Distance Education Unit, and had three purposes: to review the work done by IEC and these institutions, to attempt to generalise from that on the progress, problems and potential of distance education in developing countries and to make recommendations for the improvement and development of distance education for the future. Most of the rest of this paper is based on that study. My conclusions, therefore which are preliminary and personal apply also but not exclusively to Botswana.

We can list eight conclusions:

1 distance education seems to be here to stay - and is likely to expand

2 three distinct audiences of distance education can be identified
- adults seeking advanced educational accreditation and training

- adolescents seeking substitute secondary education
- adults seeking basic education and non formal life-

3 distance education seems to be well established and accepted at university level, probably because of the recognition of the success of the Open Universities and of the quality of their products (both teaching materials and graduates)

4 distance education has also proved itself as an effective teacher educator producing equally well-qualified and trained teachers as institution-based training

5 countless successful experiments and pilot projects of distance education at secondary and adult basic and non formal education levels have proved distance education's potential; it has the skills, the technology and the knowledge to operate effectively, at these levels.

6 the status and recognition of distance education at pre-tertiary level lags far behind that of the Open Universities and the quality and equality of the courses given are not generally accepted - sometimes justifiably so.

7 there is evidence that distance education at pretertiary level is not being given the real political commitment, support and recognition without which it won't get recognition from the public; it is also not being given, therefore, the resources which allow successful experiments to be turned into large-scale long term programmes

8 distance education can be economic by comparison with conventional education, but only if it is operating on a large scale thereby achieving economies of scale, and if it is given the resources to do so and if its specialist requirements are recognised.

4 PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACING DISTANCE EDUCATION AT PRE-TERTIARY LEVEL

For some minutes I want to look at some of the findings of out study about problems and limitations which go into more detail about how distance education programmes actually work. I have listed them under four headings: materials development and delivery, tutorial and student support, administrative and political. Problems under these categories are obviously interrelated.

4.1 Material Development and Delivery:

Many institutions are failing to produce all-or nearly all-of the teaching materials (print, audio, radio etc.) on which their students depend and for which they are paying. When they do produce them they are late, and

sometimes in the wrong order. We saw institutions where students received only one third of their materials. Partly this was because institutions could not pay attractive fees to part-time writers, partly it was because of equipment breakdown through lack of servicing or replacement resources, it was because of inappropriate administrative control and distribution systems.

Many institutions are using up their meagre course development resources reinventing the wheel producing courses to almost identical syllabuses for very similar examinations with a "Made in Here " stamp to courses that are in existence or being written by neinghbouring institutions. Such courses have to be self-contained because of the non-availability of prescribed textbooks for distance education students.

4.2 Tutorial and Student Support Services

We regularly saw institutions where the marker-tutoring systems had broken down. Delays in return of student work were unacceptable, partly because of inadequate and inappropriate payment rates for part-time tutors, partly because of a lack of training or briefing in the role of marker-tutoring and partly because of inadequate liaison and supervision.

We visited many study centres run by unqualified tutors or supervisors. With inadequate or non-existent briefing and training in the special roles of face-to-face tutoring in distance education, they were struggling to teach the whole curriculum to the students in minimum contact sessions to make up for the lack of materials. They also were rarely supervised and given almost no back-up or support from headquarters.

The tutorial or teaching system, devised for highly-motivated adult part-time students was often being used for school-age adolescents.

4.3 Administrative Structures

Most pre-tertiary (and some tertiary) distance education institutions are operating with departmental, staffing and control systems which have been designed for face-to-face conventional schools or colleges, but are imposed on them for bureaucratic reasons.

The staff are transferred in and out of such institutions from and to conventional schools or colleges with little or no regard for their aptitude for, training or interest in the special needs of distance education. Their only career prospects depend on such transfers, not on their success as distance educators.

Distance education depends more heavily than conventional education on efficient student records. We saw many examples of manual records systems having been allowed to break down, and new high-tech systems being introduced without sufficient attention to the special

information requirements of distance education and by inadequately trained operators.

Finally, we saw many institutions which had no financial control over their operations, in spite of the fact that they were large income earners for thier ministries or that their purchasing requirments were wholly different from

conventional systems. Whether or not they were efficient in collecting fees (or whether or not they exceeded budgeted expectation) made no difference to their ability to spend money on improving or even maintaining the quality of their services.

4.4 Political Commitment and Understanding

Most of the programmes had been initiated with political fanfares. Often that political enthusiasm was long passed. The institutions were being accorded very low status or priority by their own ministries though they were being expected continuously to increase their enrolments. Their resource allocations in no way reflected their numbers of students, or the changing course demands being put on them. The result was often unavoidable inefficiency and low morale - among both staff and students. Our only conclusion had to be that their importance was as political safety valves rather than as the purveyors of quality education in carefully planned developments.

5 CHALLENGES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION: A tentative agenda for Botswana (or other countries)

This is an outrageous subtible from an outside occasional visitor to Botswana and is put forward in the conviction that ignorance is bliss! Most of its suggestions are in fact of general rather than specific application but, from what I have seen of Botswana and from the schedule from this conference I believe they may be of relevance for your discussions over the next few days. From our study I am convinced that if you have not answered the questions which are raised any future distance education programme will face massive, possibly destructive, problems.

5.1 Programme Priorities

Arising out of Botswana's long - and checquered - experience of distance education, choices must now be made between many educational problems and bottlenecks to which distance education might address itself:

a) specialist, small-population (100s rather than 1000s) tertiary courses

b) primary (and possibly secondary) teacher training/upgrading

c) courses for adults and young adults, mainly in employment, needing senior secondary and secondary vocational/professional qualifications.

d) courses for the backlog of primary school leavers not admitted to Junior Secondary Schools to date and for those who have started but whish to complete or improve their JC qualification (young adults and adolescents)

f) courses in basic and non-formal education for adult post-literacy/neo-literate students

It is my conviction that, without a massive investment of new resources, it would be possible to select and implement several but not all of these options. Options d),e) and f) relate to the implementation of the Jomtien resolutions; they are harder, and perhaps politically less attrative than options a), b) and c). They are harder at least partly because the different audiences targetted by these options require different teaching methods. Moreover, as already suggested, distance education is only economic (or mainly economic) if operating for large numbers of students.

5.2 Appropriate and Accessible Media Combinations

The audiences for options a) to c) above are the traditional audiences for distance education - adults with strong motivation, working part-time to achieve their educational goals. We have ample evidence that they can succeed well with a mixture of distance education materials (correspondence courses, radio or audio programmes), extensive individualised home study, and occasional study centre tutorials.

The audiences for options d) and e) above, however, which are currently the main audiences for the Department of Non-Formal Education/Distance Education Unit, are those for which distance education learning materials and individualised home study are least well-designed. Such audiences need much more elaborately structured face to face support services and supervision. These can only be provided at considerable cost-even if the end result is marginally (or even significantly) cheaper than conventional schooling.

The audience for option f) above is increasingly recognised as one for which only a distance education/open learning approach can be made available. Given low literacy levels, individual correspondence courses are difficult to use. Probably audio-led teaching materials, supported by simple and highly illustrated print materials, and used in organised study-group structures, are most appropriate.

It seems clear that all the audiences for options c) to f) above (and perhaps for e) and b) also) need specially designed vocational and technical courses within the programmes designed for them. These cannot be effectively offered only by distance education media. They require specially equipped (and therefore costly) study centre facilities for practical work. If such facilities exist, they can be offered at-a-distance effectively.

5.3 Possibilities for Partnerships (or necessities for partnership)

This is the central theme of this conference. I believe it is a central theme for the effective use of distance education for the purposes of achieving education for all by the year 2000 - or even by the year 2020. However strong a distance education institution, and however well resourced, it cannot operate in an educational vacuum. It can only operate effectively and economically by using the resources which exist independently of itself within its educational environment. And that is partnership. I want to list here six levels of partnership through which distance education can strengthen its provision:

a) buying in, and adapting or supplementing where necessary, existing courses from outside; there are serious questions to be answered about the levels of education at which this is possible;

b) joint course development and production with similar distance education institutions in the region; this is notoriously difficult, but this region has successful experience of this kind of partnership to draw on;

c) internal consertia partnerships - e.g. between the Department of Non Formal Education and the University, or DNFE and the Teacher Training Division, or DNFE and the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Health.

d) Service agency operations in which the distance education institution provides services of distance education materials development, training strategies and staff training courses to other institutions (e.g. the Red Cross, Community Development Agencies, Road Safety or Aids Protection organisations) which are not, primarily, educational.

e) the part-time use of the staff, buildings and resources of other educational bodies, especially those with regional and local coverage

f) participation in sub-regional, regional and international training, support and professional development activities.

5.4. Institutional Choices

In order to implement programmes that emerge from answers to questions raised in the previous three subsections, it will be necessary to make certain choices about the intitutional structures required to make that implementation effective. I suggest to you three such choices:

a) concerning the nature of the institution: will it/they be:

- a series of single-purpose, small-scale, institutions controlled by the government departments concerned with those purposes?

- a department of an existing national institution (e.g. the university) prepared to take on a range of programmes?

- a multi-purpose national intitute with semi-autonomous, parastatal or statutory body status?

- an independent organisation, self-financing, whether commercially oriented or a non-profit NGO?

b) concerning the nature of the political commitment to distance education programmes: will it be:

-a political commitment to the establishment of real distance education alternative strategies i.e. the allocation of realistic resources adequate to the effective operation of such strategies?

- a tolerated but not heavily supported programme which must therefore become (and is allowed to become) self-financing?

- a political safety valve which is not interested in effective distance education programmes but only in its existence; the result could be inefficient resource-starved programmes?

c) concerning the administrative and staffing structures through which such programmes can be implemented: will it be:

- the recognition of specialisms, career-structures, career development possibilities and specialist training opportunities for distance educators?

- the treatment of distance eudcation institutions and staff as simply part of the conventional structures and staff, liable therefore to transfer to and from ttraditional and conventional institutions?

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education opened the conference by posing two questions. I'm not sure that this paper has offered answers to those questions.

To conclude it, however, I want to summarise my own answers to those questions:

1) - should we regard distance education as an alternative system of education?

- NO: distance education must offer supplementary or alternative routes to the education system chosen by a particular government; this has implications on the way in which such an educational system is implemented.

2. - must distance education be seen as an educational provision of the last resort?

NO: distance eudcation may be seen by some prospective students as their last resort to education, but it must be an education of equal quality to that offered by conventionl programmes, an education which, for some prospective students, is preferable to conventional offerings.

3 - bad distance education, therefore, is quite possibly worse than no education at all.